

Christmas Eve at the Grange

Continued from page 4.

It was in all truth a very awkward predicament, and as I was making my brains for some expedient young Governor's words, that I was like Mr. Lovelace when seen from behind, occurred to me and suggested a plan to outwit them. If the soldiers remained in the hall poor Master Lovelace must either be starved or driven to surrender, and either event spelled ruin. My plan was therefore to play at escaping from the house, get to my horse and lead the soldiers a dance across country in pursuit.

There was a small casement from which I could easily leap to the terrace below, make a dash for the stable yard where the horses were ready and ride away across the park beyond. That was easy, but it must be so done that one or other of the sentries should catch sight of me and thus bring the rest of the pack upon my heels.

I knew where the men were posted, and, having from an upper window attracted the attention of the groom who had my horse in readiness, I went down, opened the casement and leaped out. It was now getting dusk, and a soldier who was close at hand saw and challenged me instantly and discharged his musket as I was darting toward the stable.

In a moment the whole place was in the utmost confusion, and as I mounted, taking care to pretend a violent attack upon the man who held my horse while I told him to say I was a stranger to him, the troopers were already to horse and came clattering round the old house after me.

"Things went just as I would have had them," I was careful that none of the men should see my face, and I put my horse at the hedge and leaped into the park.

I did not hurry matters at the start. The hedge caused a little trouble to some of the troopers, and, my wish being to bring as many of them as I could away from the Grange, it was my cue to let them think that they could catch me, but this had consequences of a different kind. Those who could not take the leap stopped to empty their muskets after me, and then, finding the gate, they came streaming through.

Old Noll had little relish for the shooting, and when one of the balls, from an accidentally well aimed shot, came ripping and singling close to his ears he shook his head and plunged forward as though impatient to be out of range.

It was a new sensation to play the part of the fox in the hunt, but I had no qualms about the result.

I went easily across the great park, therefore, dropped into Windmill lane at the end, rattled across Twynbury common and skirted the three cornered copse, being careful all the time to keep as much in sight of the hounds as the fast darkening evening would allow.

Once I played a trick on them and let them come almost upon me. I had breathed old Noll up the steep side of the haunch, and once across it I dismounted and waited for my pursuers. On catching sight of me the men raised



"YOU HAD BETTER TAKE SIR BURTON'S ARM."

such a shout of exultation as brought all the hounds spurring up, and they dashed toward me, making sure of their capture.

But I was ready, and, picking my way along the zigzag sides of the fir wood there, I carried out the plan I had formed. At the bottom of the valley, between the haunch and Dandy Chino, lie the Quagmire woods, as nasty and dangerous a bit of country as the name could mean, and into this I purposed to lead them by degrees. Noll and I knew the way well enough, but it was another case with the fellows who were after me. I led them on, keeping in sight till they were well into the middle of the woods, and when I reached the sudden turn by Dead Man's corner I gave Noll his head, and away we flew along the narrow track, leaving the men floundering in the quagmire, calling to one another and shouting and oathing finely.

We were soon clear off, and, urging the old horse to his utmost efforts, I headed in the direction of Hardings and rattled home at a pace which would have surprised the soldiers indeed could they have seen it.

Once at Hardings I changed my costume rapidly, while another horse was saddled, and then galloped back through the night to Launston. I was anxious to know how matters had sped there in my absence and I hoped indeed that Master Lovelace had already been released and was away with young Gorman, as I had arranged.

But to my chagrin my ruse had been but partly a success. Captain Hilary and Sir Burton were still at the Grange and in the hall awaiting the return of the troopers with their captive. A number of the guests had arrived and were grouped about in the rooms and hall looking mightily ill at ease and uncomfortable, while Audrey was

far more distressed than before and had been weeping.

"You have been away, Sir Geoffrey?" said the captain.

"I am not aware that I am your prisoner or accountable to you for my movements," I answered brusquely. "I think you have carried this farce far enough. In truth, I shall hold you responsible for the outrage to which I have been subjected. Because I chose to leave here and gallop to Hardings for a change of costume your fellows, forsooth, must needs come clattering after me, firing their muskets and actually putting my life to the hazard. You'll find them now hard stuck in the bogs on the other side of Muttelbury launch. But the thing is intolerable. Come, Audrey, let us go to the guests and leave this gentleman to do his will."

The captain's face darkened as I said this, while Sir Burton Prendergast gave me an ugly, sneering look. And when Audrey put her hand on my arm she showed in her fingers a slip of a note and whispered, "Take it. Danger."

"This farce has gone far enough, Sir Geoffrey, as you say," cried Prendergast, growing angry and coming to us. "Miss Audrey will remain in my charge. Have a care," he added in a whisper which could not reach the captain's ears. "I know the secret of this statue and shall tell it unless Mistress Audrey purchases my silence in the way I have told her."

I could have struck him for his mean, cowardly threat, but I masked my temper.

"Probably she will put herself in my hands, Sir Burton, seeing that she is affianced to me."

"If she does not wish to ruin her father and you all, she will tell you rather than she is affianced to me, Sir Geoffrey. A word from me and this thing will be known. And I am in deadly earnest."

But the game was not lost yet for all that. I knew that my ruse had drawn off nearly all the troops and that if I could but snuggle Master Lovelace out of the statue he could get away easily from the house with one of my men to act as guide.

I stood a moment as if thinking in great perplexity, and then, giving Audrey, who was very pale and frightened, a significant pressure of the hand that lay on my arm, I released it.

"I see no other course, Audrey, but to comply. You had better take Sir Burton's arm and go to the ballroom. We must set things going or the whole county will think we are mad."

His face lighted with triumph as he held out his arm and my sweet Audrey placed the tips of her fingers upon it, while I turned to Gorman and, under pretense of giving him some directions about the evening's arrangements, whispered that he was to get the prisoner out when I had cleared the hall and send him away with my men as guide.

I exchanged a few sentences with the captain, who stood plucking moodily at his mustache, and then went after Audrey.

All the guests were now in the great ballroom, and, signaling to Audrey to come with her partner to me, I took my stand close to the door of a small room that lay between that and the dining room. I maneuvered so that Sir Burton stood between me and the door, which I placed ajar, and then my plan was ready.

"This is a serious matter, Audrey," I said, "and I think Sir Burton and I had better talk it over together."

"I have no wish for your interference, Sir Geoffrey," he replied impatiently. "I can manage my own affairs."

"But this is more my affair than yours," I retorted. And before he knew what I was intending I linked my arm in his and pushed him roughly through the door and, clapping my hand on his mouth, forced him through into the dining room beyond. Then I freed his mouth, and he did precisely what I had reckoned on his doing.

He sent up a cry for help, shouting that there was treachery, and called for Captain Hilary, who came running in from the hall, on to which the dining room opened. As soon as the captain entered I slammed the door behind him, and, setting my back to the door, I turned upon the two men.

"This is a private quarrel between Sir Burton Prendergast and myself, Captain Hilary, and you will have the goodness not to interfere."

"There is treachery afoot!" shouted Sir Burton, mad with rage. "The prisoner you want is in the hall concealed in the statue, captain. This is a trick to cheat you of him."

"Let me pass, sir. I shall hold you responsible," said the captain to me on the instant, speaking very angrily.

"Responsible for what?" I exclaimed. "The man's mad. Does he mean that he and you have been all this time in the hall there and he has given you no inkling of the story he now tells? You don't believe that, surely?" I said, holding my place at the door and listening with all my ears for some sound that Gorman had done his work.

"Let me pass, sir!" cried the officer, drawing his sword. "In the name of the king let me pass!"

"Do you draw upon an unarmed man?" I exclaimed, and as I spoke I heard a sound from the hall which seemed to show that young Gorman had succeeded.

"If you hinder me further your blood will be on your own head. Will you let me pass?" said the officer fiercely.

"Do you mean you would murder me for a cock and bull story such as Sir Burton Prendergast's?" I asked, delaying him to the last safe second. "The door there through the anteroom is open, but if you prefer this it is nothing to me."

He dashed out sword in hand, and Sir Burton was following him when I laid my hand on him and barred the way.

"I have a reckoning with you," I said, for I wished to give time for Master Lovelace to get clear away, and words between us grew hot and fast until Captain Hilary came back and demanded that Sir Burton should come and explain the secret of the hiding place. I let him go then and followed.

Then Audrey and some of the guests came out into the hall, and a pretty scene of cross purposes followed. Sir Burton Prendergast asserted that the horse was the hiding place, and he and the officer tried vainly to discover the opening until Captain Hilary, using

all patience, declared that he would have the statue heaved in pieces if the secret could not be found.

"But there is nothing in it," I said for the twentieth time, and at length, when I saw Gorman among the rest and a glance told me all was well, and, fearing, moreover, that the statue would really be destroyed, I myself opened it.

"You can see for yourself," I said. And while Captain Hilary thrust his head into the opening a smile ran round the faces of the guests, who came crowding forward in curiosity at the secret of the statue and amusement at the apparent farce of the proceedings.

The captain flushed with vexation at cutting so sorry a figure and was in doubt whether to vent his anger on me or on Sir Burton.

"There was some one there, I know," said the latter, trying to bluff it off.

"Do I understand that you make an insinuation of falsehood against me, Sir Burton Prendergast?" I asked, facing him and speaking sternly. "This matter is now personal to me." And, not relishing my stare and having no stomach for a quarrel, he flinched and with a shrug of the shoulders said to the officer:

"I am very sorry, Captain Hilary, but it seems I was wrong."

"What do you propose to do next, captain?" I asked. "We are at your commands, but you will understand that our Christmas keeping is not likely to be the merrier for any prolonging of this matter."

"I shall hold you responsible for this, Sir Burton. You have kept me here while things have been arranged for the prisoner's escape. I withdraw my word and shall make my report." Thus the interfering bully found himself prostrate between the two of us and in danger of kicks from us both. "If the prisoner was in concealment there and you knew it you have prevented my capturing him. Why didn't you tell me, sir?"

I smiled at this turn, but it was not one to let the captain believe we had ever concealed any one.

"Rest your mind easy and do not blame even this meddling mischief maker carelessly. We have no one at the Grange whom we wish to conceal." And this was true, for by this time Master Lovelace was well on his way to the boat.

Captain Hilary went away then, grumbling and smarting with the irritation of a man who feels he has been tricked, but cannot lay finger on the proof, and as soon as he was gone I signaled to Audrey and Gorman to lead the guests away while I detained the cowardly traitor who had come so near to causing serious mischief.

"A word with you, Sir Burton," I said shortly. "You have acted tonight the part of a coward and a spy, and in doing it you have cast imputations on me. Tonight I do not make it a personal matter, but tomorrow, if you are still in the county of Sussex, or if you are in six months you show your face here, I give you my honor that I will horse-whip you first and shoot afterward. You know whether I am a man to keep my word."

He turned pallid with fear, said not a syllable and without more than one sneaking, furtive, frightened look at me slunk away and the next morning left the country for his health's sake.

I was still loitering in the hall when Gorman came and told me how he had managed to get Master Lovelace away, and as I was praising him for his smartness Audrey came.

"Is all safe now, Geoffrey?" "Yes, sweetheart; you can dance with a free heart."

"A free heart?" she echoed, playing on my words and smiling.

"So far as all that is concerned."

"All that" was very terrible while it lasted. But you did splendidly.

"A pentent had to earn his forgiveness, Audrey. Is it earned?"

"Not quite earned yet. You gave me up very readily to Sir Burton, you know," she cried and withdrew the hand she had slipped into mine, moved



"LET ME PASS, SIR!" CRIED THE OFFICER.

some paces away and stood glaring at me, demure in face, but with eyes all alight with smiles.

"How can I earn it? I did what I did for the best."

"You are bad at guessing riddles," she laughed.

"She's under the mistletoe, Geoffrey! Don't you see?" cried Gorman from the doorway, with a laugh.

"Mistletoe, Gorman?" exclaimed Audrey, blushing rose red. But before she could turn to run after him I had caught her in my arms.

"It is Christmas eve, sweetheart, and I am a clown of a pentent," I whispered as I kissed her.

"You deserve to be punished for your delinquence," she protested.

"Then give it me back, Audrey. And I held her happy, blushing face close to mine.

"If I do it's under compulsion," cried Gorman again as he ran off to join the dancers.

We lingered a moment for that which was under neither mistletoe nor compulsion and then followed him, forgetting all about the recent crisis and as happy a pair of lovers as all Sussex could find that merry Christmas eve.

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